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Briefing Book: National Endowment for the Arts (1994): News Article 03

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A Bloody Good Show?

Over the years the federal arts agency has enthusiastically supported the work of the Walker. In the last three years, the museum received more than \$1 million from the NEA. Last year it received \$104,000 for its performance arts programs and museum officials say only about \$150 went to the Athey performance. The artist declined to say what fee he had received, but general admission was \$10.

In a way, this is the first of the kind of seasonal land mines that NEA Chairman Jane Alexander can expect. In its 28-year history, only 11 of 100,000 grants have caused controversy, according to the agency—but those, including one artist's rendering of a crucifix in a jar of urine, have caused major trouble. Last year the NEA found itself under fire when a group of artists in San Diego began giving away \$10 bills to undocumented workers. The artists were one part of a four-year project studying art and culture along the border and had received \$5,000 of the \$250,000 the project garnered in federal funding. Later, the NEA told the sponsoring agencies that it was disallowing \$4,500.

Alexander said yesterday she trusted the judgment of the Walker and that controversial art is part of country's artistic menu.

"Not all art is for everybody. . . . I appreciate that some people would find this art difficult," she said. "Americans are certainly not used to seeing blood-letting, except in films, and when it happens in person it must be surprising. I am sure a number of people were quite uncomfortable."

After speaking to the Walker's director yesterday, Alexander said she was satisfied that all "appropriate precautions" had been taken. "So what are we left with that was considered controversial?" asked Alexander. "The scarification, the ritual-like aspect? Is it that the man is homosexual? I think those are areas that have to be carefully considered."

Helen Brunner, the executive director of the National Association of Artists Organizations, added, "I believe if we don't get those flash points, NEA isn't getting its job done. If NEA is only funding work that doesn't offend anyone, it isn't fostering art."

Athey says he knows his work isn't for everyone and says the performance is meant to evoke strong reactions. "I have been doing ornate cutting for a few years. It is very common for people who do cutting to do a print. I believe it's a way of connecting the performance to the audience," said Athey, the assistant to the editor at L.A. Weekly.

He said, "I'm HIV-positive and healthy. . . . People always leave. They have come out of curiosity. They can't handle the live blood and live pain."

As part of its mission, the Walker presents both acknowledged masters and experimental artists in 400 annual events. "We strive for a balanced and inclusive program and we feel it is our responsibility to present a diversity of artistic voices," said Kathy Halbreich, the museum's director. In 1963, she recalled, the museum was roundly criticized for presenting Merce Cunningham and John Cage who were called "anarchists" by the local media. Halbreich said the museum had received 50 telephone calls and a number of letters over Athey's performance, reflecting that "the issues are quite confused in people's minds."

A press release on Athey described his body as his canvas and said "when pierced and covered with his own blood [he] is evocative of Saint Sebastian. Medical paraphernalia and bondage and discipline toys and techniques are also used in the performance. Due to the nature of this material, viewer discretion is advised."

John Killacky, the curator of performing arts at the Walker, said Athey's performance "raises the questions we all share about HIV, the fear and the anxiety." After the scarification, which Athey and Killacky tied to African traditions, the pattern was blotted on towels and then clipped to a clothesline. "They were raised slowly to the top of the ceiling and over the audience's head," said Killacky. He estimated that the prints were never less than eight feet above the audience.